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ABSTRACT

Interviews with parents of fifth-graders in 153 urban and suburban Chicago (Illinois) area households provided researchers with answers to several questions about the nature of parent participation in education. The researchers considered parent participation to be an aspect of educational politics. They measured the level of participation at the "micro-level," where household and schoolroom meet, by analyzing the frequency, degree of self-initiation, and content of the contacts maintained by parents with their children's teachers. The study found that these three factors were positively related to the parents' educational attainment, preferences for more individualized instruction, and higher expectations for their children's future schooling. Higher levels of teacher contact were maintained for male children and contacts were more frequent when the children's academic capabilities were rated either extremely high or extremely low as measured by a test of reading comprehension. Parents new to schools also maintained higher levels of contact, while longer-term residents initiated fewer interactions. The mother's employment status, the number of children in the family, and the parents' satisfaction with their children's schooling experiences did not correlate with the participation measures. (Author/PGD)

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# Redefining Lay Participation in Educational Politics: Parental Activity at the Levels of School and Classroom

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Redefining Lay Participation in Educational Politics

## Introduction

In spite of the rather expansive definitions of "the political" offered by Laswell (who gets what, when, and how; Laswell, 1936) or Easton (the "authorative allocation of values"; Easton, 1953), analysts of political activity in public institutions have commonly adopted a narrow focus restricted to the more formal, salient, and centralized structures in which higher level policy making occurs. Students of educational politics have not acted differently. The dominant concerns of educational researchers working in what we shall call the "macro-level" tradition have been the analysis of voting patterns, characteristics of school board candidates and incumbents, interest group influences, and board-superintendent relationships. Even those who have taken their research to the building site often study the formalized structures such as parent-teacher associations and mandated parent advisory councils.

Less attention has been paid to the political process at work at the more "micro levels" of the school and classroom where the technical activity of schooling is undertaken. It is at these levels that students, teachers, and material resources interact to produce learning outcomes. And at these levels we find the important nexus between a child's home environment and the school. Recent research which employs principles of economics has begun to illuminate resource allocations within and among classrooms and homes (see Thomas, Kemmerer & Monk, 1979; and Brown & Saks, 1980) assuming that allocative decision making is a multi-staged process flowing from

comprehensive policy making in federal and state governments to the individual decision of parents, teachers, and students.

This study extends the economic research analog to the examination of political activity. We investigate participation at the micro level through an analysis of parents' contacts with their children's fifth-grade teachers. In this study of 150 households we find that political activity, broadly defined, may be more extensive and potentially more vital than one might commonly expect and that parental participation in the school lives of their children takes on distinctive patterns which should inform the policies which district and building-level administrators promulgate.

## Qualities of Participation

The concept of participation is central to both the older (macro) approach to political analysis and the newer (micro) developments in educational politics which this study would encourage. The older generation, with its concern for higher order structures, defines participation as the casting of votes or candidacy for positions of authority in school systems. Participation so defined is preliminary to the selection of representatives or trustees for school district governance (see Mann, 1977).

The voter-participant may help determine the future composition of a school board which will act as a representative or trustee body vis-a-vis the general citizenry. The voter-participant may also affect the amount of resources through tax levy and bond referenda, which representative/trustee board members may allocate to educational functions. The candidate-participant seeks to assume a position on the school board through which he or she may act as a representative of community interests or trustee

overseeing the management of the school organization. In Parsonian terms, participation of these sorts brings elements of the institutional environment surrounding the school district to bear on the managerial level of the organization.

Participation in the newer sense, often used by public choice theorists (see Niskanen, 1971; and Michaelsen, forthcoming), envisions a closer connection between the client and the technical level of the organization. Potential participants, according to public choice theory, are parents who, after their children, become the direct clients of the school and whose preferences should have a determining impact on the levels and kinds of services provided in schools and classrooms. Public choice participation devalues the centralized and intermediary role of the representative/trustee in favor of direct involvement and decentralized governance. It also emphasizes the private as opposed to social benefits produced by schooling (Levin, 1968).

## Lay Participation as Parent Contacts with Teachers

Participation as measured and analyzed in this study involves the frequency, source of initiation, and content of contacts which parents maintain with their children's teachers. Although we did not assess the outcomes of contacts, we presumed that parent/teacher interaction serves to inform the teacher of parental knowledge of a child's capabilities and difficulties and alerts the parent to the teacher's expectations, curricular program, and individual advice, all of which parents may employ to reinforce classroom-based learning in the home.

We hypothesized that levels of parent contacts with teachers would be associated with three sets of factors. The first set includes parental

characteristics and dispositions: parents' educational attainment, preferences for curricular program and instructional approaches in the child's classroom, and expectations for the child's future schooling. We anticipated that parental investments in contacts with teachers would be higher for parents who had higher levels of formal schooling; for parents who preferred wider curricular variety in their children's school programs (including the arts and foreign languages); for parents who held stronger preferences for more individualized instruction; and for parents who expected their children to complete a college degree.[1] All four of the factors in the "parent set" are presumed to interrelate. Studies in social psychology suggest that parents with higher educational attainment tend to place a high value on their children's achievement and educational advancement, want wider exposure to non-traditional studies and more child-focused instruction which allows for the child to make self-directed learning decisions, and view success in earlier stages of schooling as necessary and sequential for longer-range attainment (see, generally, Davis and Havighurst, 1946; and Kohn, 1977). Our analyses discussed later in this paper reveal that, in our sample, the frequency, self-initiation, and content of parents' contacts with teachers were positively related to parents' education, preferences for more individualized instruction, and higher expectations for their children's future schooling.

The second set of factors relates to the child, namely, his or her academic ability and sex. Human capital theory postulates that higher levels of investment will be made in people whose stocks of personal capital show promise of greater return on investment (see Schultz, 1974; and Becker, 1976). We tested the relationship between parent/teacher contacts and sex of the child to see if sex inequities may extend to favor investments in boys more

than girls. The results of our analyses indicate that in our sample parents had higher levels of contact for boys than for girls and interacted more often when their children had extremely low and extremely high academic capabilities as measured by a test of reading comprehension.

A third set of factors includes conditions which might act as constraints on parental time or dispositions to make contact with teachers. We cross-tabulated with contact activity the mother's employment status outside the home, the number of children in the family, the family's years of residence in the school district, and the parents' general satisfaction with the child's schooling experiences. For this set of factors we hypothesized that mothers who were employed full or part time outside the home would have greater limitations than women unemployed outside the home on the time they might spend interacting with teachers; that parents with more children would have to divide their attention, reducing the potential time for contacts with teachers of each child; that parents would initiate and structure more frequent contacts with teachers the longer they had lived in the school community, assuming that over time parents become more familiar with, more "at home" in, the school environment; and that parents who had grievances with a teacher's or school's program or practices would invest more heavily in contacts to monitor and influence their children's classroom experiences. Within this set of factors we found that the family's years of residence was the single element which correlated with parental contacts. However, the direction of association ran counter to expectation. Parents who maintained higher levels of contact were generally new to the school. Longer term residents had generally fewer and usually teacher-initiated interactions.

In a later section we present the data and more extensive analyses of the three sets of factors outlined above. In the next section we discuss the

methodologies for data collection and statistical analyses employed in this study.

## Methods of Data Collection and Statistical Analyses

Data which met the conditions prescribed by the basic questions addressed in this study were collected from a sample of households and classrooms included in the second phase (1979) of the project, "Resource Allocation in Classrooms and Homes," conducted at the Educational Finance and Productivity Center at the University of Chicago.[2] A total of 153 households was generated from a sample of public suburban and urban elementary schools in districts stratified according to median family income and average per-pupil expenditure. Fifth-grade classrooms were chosen for the project.

Most of the data for this study were gathered by means of home interviews with parents. In 82 percent of the households the mother served as the sole respondent; in 13 percent both the mother and father participated; and in 5 percent the father was interviewed alone. In households where both parents were present for the interview the mother's responses were used in the analyses if the parents disagreed on any item. This procedures allows for the greatest possible consistency in the source of data.

Trained interviewers followed a structured questionnaire to obtain demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral information about parents. Standardized tests of reading comprehension were administered to the fifth-grade children in the study to gather information on their general academic abilities. The specification of all variables in reported in the appendix of this paper.

Both chi-square tests and discriminant function analysis were employed in the analyses of data. For chi-square tests all continuous variables were treated as ordered measures and were categorized as described in the appendix. At a first level analysis we cross-classified the variables in pairs and used the chi-square test of association to determine whether or not the frequencies observed in the data were significantly different from those expected under the assumption that the variables were statistically independent.

We also executed a multivariate test of associations between parent contacts and a selection of the independent variables. We employed discriminant analysis as an exploratory technique in which two categories of parental contact activity were considered the "groups" and the variables for which we had non-dichotomous, continuous data were included as potentially discriminating variables in a step wise process. Wilks' lambda was chosen as the criterion for inclusion/exclusion of a variable in the final discriminating function.

Those variables which could not be entered into the discriminant function analyses were used as controls on the strongest predictor variable related to parent contacts. Under these circumstances we employed a second chi-square test in which the relationship between the strongest predictor variable and parental contact activity was controlled on each remaining independent variable. In all chi-sqaure analyses we adopted the .05 level of probability as a criterion of significance since the sample in this study was relatively small (approximately 150 cases), and since small samples must exhibit very strong relationships to indicate significant dependence between variables at any commonly accepted level of probability (Blalock, 1972, pp. 291-92).

## Results of the Analyses

The 153 households in our sample were fairly evenly distributed across the ranges and categories within variables examined in this study. Table 1 displays the frequencies of cases in each categorized variable included in the chi-square analyses.

In this sample parents in over half of the households reported three or more contacts which they either initiated themselves or to which they brought their own "agenda." Only information on contacts which occurred during a five-month period, from September 1979 through January 1980, were counted in this study.

Chi-square tests of the bivariate relationships between parent/teacher contacts and each independent variable reveal that only four characteristics appear to differentiate between parents who had relatively more frequent and self-initiated contacts with teachers and parents who were less involved in the classroom lives of their children. The variables most strongly associated with contact activity were the family's years of residence in the school district (fewer years/higher contact activity; $x^2$ probability=.0073) and parents' education (higher attainment/higher contact activity; $x^2$ probability=.0096). Somewhat weaker but statistically significant relationships held between contact activity and parents' expectations for their children's future schooling (more schooling expected/higher contact activity; $x^2$ probability=.0205) and sex of the child (child is boy/higher contact activity; $x^2$ probability=.0305). The full set of chi-square results is reported in table 2. The composite picture which emerges from these results is that parents who maintained more frequent and self-initiated contact with teachers (1) had lived in their school district a relatively short period of

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY CATEGORIES IN EACH VARIABLE

PARENT FACTORS

Parents' Education[a]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| low | 40 cases | 27% of the sample |
| middle | 50 | 34 |
| high | 58 | 39 |

Preferences for Curricular Variety

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| less variety preferred | 81 cases | 53% of the sample |
| more variety preferred | 72 | 47 |

Preferences for Instructional Grouping

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| smaller grouping preferred | 89 cases | 58% of the sample |
| larger grouping preferred | 64 | 42 |

Expected Future Schooling

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| less than B.A. | 69 cases | 45% of the sample |
| B.A. or more | 84 | 55 |

CHILD FACTORS

Child's Reading Ability[b]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| poor | 30 cases | 20% of the sample |
| grade-level | 69 | 46 |
| very good | 51 | 34 |

Sex of the Child

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| boys | 81 cases | 53% of the sample |
| girls | 72 | 47 |

EXOGENOUS FACTORS

Mother's Employment Outside the Home

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| not employed | 56 cases | 37% of the sample |
| part time | 48 | 31 |
| full time | 49 | 32 |

Number of Children in the Family

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| one or two | 69 cases | 45% of the sample |
| three or more | 84 | 55 |

[a] In 5 households, the educational attainment of the father was not obtained.

[b] 3 children did not take the reading comprehension test

TABLE 1 CONTINUED

EXOGENOUS FACTORS

Family's Years of Residence in District

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| five or fewer | 74 cases | 48% of the sample |
| six or more | 79 | 52 |

Satisfaction with Schooling Experiences

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| less than full satisfaction | 59 cases | 39% of the sample |
| full satisfaction | 93 | 61 |

TABLE 2

RESULTS OF CHI-SQUARE ANALYSES OF CONTACT ACTIVITY CROSSTABULATED WITH THE FOLLOWING INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

| VARIABLE | $X^2$ (df) | PROBABILITY | DIRECTION OF ASSOCIATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| Parents' Education | 9.29 (2) | .0096 | strongly positive |
| Preferences for Curricular Variety | 1.96 (1) | .1611 | mildly positive |
| Preferences for Size in Instructional Grouping | 1.77 (1) | .1837 | mildly negative |
| Expected Future Schooling | 5.37 (1) | .0205 | strongly positive |
| Child's Reading Ability | 1.81 (2) | .4034 | curvilinear |
| Sex of the Child (boy=0, girl=1) | 4.68 (1) | .0305 | strongly negative |
| Mother's Employment | .26 (2) | .8772 | no association |
| Number of Children | .87 (1) | .3503 | mildly negative |
| Family's Years of Residence | 7.20 (1) | .0073 | strongly negative |
| Satisfaction with Schooling (low=0, high=1) | 3.78 (1) | .0519 | mildly negative |

time, (2) were more highly educated, (3) expected their children to complete a college degree, and (4) had a boy as the project child.

In the discriminant function analysis all variables except sex of the child and years of residence were entered in a step wise manner as independent variables which might discriminate between households in which parents were either more or less active in their contacts with teachers. Sex was excluded as a nominal variable and years of residence were only available for the analyses in this study in a dichotomous form (five years of residence in the district or fewer; six or more years' residence). In lieu of categorized forms, the data for all other variables were entered in raw form. We substitued mother's actual schooling attainment for the composite of both parents' education which was used in the chi-square analyses.

The resulting discriminant function confirms that parents' education and expected future schooling were significantly associated with parental contact activity, consistent with the chi-square analyses. However, the child's reading ability and parents' preferences for instructional grouping (individualized instruction) emerged as strong discriminating variables as well. In the step wise procedure, child's ability entered third, after mother's education / and expected future schooling, as one of the more powerful predictors of contact activity (see table 3).[3] Since the step wise procedure allows for sequential controls on previously entered variables as remaining ones are tested, this multivariate analysis reveals that, even when the effects of mother's education on other variables is controlled, three other factors--child's ability, expected future schooling, and preferences for individualized instruction--discriminate between households with higher and lower levels of contact with teachers.

TABLE 3

RESULTS OF THE DISCRIMINANT FUNCTION ANALYSIS

SUMMARY TABLE

| Step | and Variable Entered | Wilks' Lambda | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Mother Education | .9440 | .0037 |
| 2 | Expected Future Schooling | .9214 | .0025 |
| 3 | Child's Reading Ability | .8940 | .0010 |
| 4 | Preferences for Instructional Grouping | .8829 | .0012 |

CANONICAL DISCRIMINANT FUNCTION

| | |
|---|---|
| functions: | 1 |
| eigenvalue: | .13265 |
| canon. correlation: | .3422 |
| Wilks' Lambda: | .8829 |
| chi-squared: | 18.061 |
| df: | 4 |
| significance: | .0012 |

Since the two variables, years of residence and sex of the child, had strong associations with parental contact activity in the bivariate chi-square tests but were not entered in the discriminant function analysis we crosstabulated the single most significant relationship (between parents' education and contact activity) controlling on each of these remaining two factors.

The association between parents' education and contact activity declines when it is controlled on years of residence (see table 4). Nevertheless, in all three categories of parents' education larger proportions of parents were more active when they had lived in their school districts for five or fewer years and larger proportions were less active when their period of residence was six years or more.

When parents' education and contact activity were crosstabulated with

TABLE 4

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND LEVELS OF CONTACT ACTIVITY
CONTROLLING ON YEARS OF RESIDENCE (N=148)

| | | YEARS OF RESIDENCE IN SCHOOL DISTRICT | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Five or fewer | | | Six or more | | |
| PARENTS' EDUCATION | | CONTACT ACTIVITY Lower | Higher | Total | CONTACT ACTIVITY Lower | Higher | Total |
| High School or Less | No. | (8) | (5) | (13) | (19) | (8) | (27) |
| | % | 61.5 | 38.5 | 18.1 | 70.4 | 29.6 | 35.5 |
| Some College | No. | (10) | (17) | (27) | (14) | (9) | (23) |
| | % | 37.0 | 63.0 | 37.5 | 60.9 | 39.1 | 30.3 |
| B.A. or more | No. | (9) | (23) | (32) | (12) | (14) | (26) |
| | % | 28.1 | 71.9 | 44.4 | 46.2 | 53.8 | 34.2 |
| Total | No. | (27) | (45) | (72) | (45) | (31) | (76) |
| | % | 37.5 | 62.5 | 100.0 | 59.2 | 40.8 | 100.0 |
| | | chi squares: 4.41 df=2 $x^2$ probability=.1104 | | | chi squares: 3.25 df=2 $x^2$ probability=.1965 | | |

Zero-order gamma = .39
First-order partial gamma = .35

sex of the child, similar effects emerge. Regardless of parental educational background, parents were more involved in their boys' classrooms than in their girls' (see table 5). Furthermore, the association between parents' education and contact activity is reduced somewhat in the subset of cases involving boys but retains its strength among families with girls. These results suggest that parental investment in the schooling of boys may be less bound to the socioeconomic status of the family than parental investment in the schooling of girls.

In sum, parental participation as measured by contacts with teachers is reasonably high in this research sample. Nearly 53 percent of the households reported three or more contacts with teachers during a five-month period--contacts which parents either initiated or to which the brought their own pre-determined lists of information to be gained or shared. Households which maintained higher levels of contact activity were distinguishable from less active housholds on six factors. Higher contact activity was associated with higher parental education, shorter periods of residence in the school districts, greater parental interest in more individualized instructional modes, parental expectations that the child would complete at least a B.A. degree, children who were either deficient in reading skills or exceptionally able (but not "grade-level" readers), and children who were boys.

## Discussion

While the levels of parental participation in schooling through contacts with teachers may be higher than one might expect, certain of the factors associated with higher contact activity come as no surprise. Previous studies of parents who raise grievances with school personnel (Jennings, 1969)

TABLE 5

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND LEVELS OF CONTACT ACTIVITY
CONTROLLING ON SEX OF THE CHILD (N=153)

| | | SEX OF THE CHILD | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Boys | | | Girls | | |
| PARENTS' EDUCATION | | CONTACT ACTIVITY Lower | Higher | Total | CONTACT ACTIVITY Lower | Higher | Total |
| High School or Less | No. | (12) | (11) | (23) | (15) | (2) | (17) |
| | % | 52.2 | 47.8 | 29.5 | 88.2 | 11.8 | 24.3 |
| Some College | No. | (12) | (19) | (31) | (17) | (7) | (19) |
| | % | 38.7 | 61.3 | 39.7 | 63.2 | 36.8 | 27.1 |
| B.A. or more | No. | (6) | (18) | (24) | (15) | (19) | (34) |
| | % | 25.0 | 75.0 | 30.8 | 44.1 | 55.9 | 48.6 |
| Total | No. | (30) | (48) | (78) | (42) | (28) | (70) |
| | % | 38.5 | 61.5 | 100.0 | 60.0 | 40.0 | 100.0 |
| | | chi squares: 3.67 df=2 $x^2$ probability=.1600 | | | chi squares: 9.30 df=2 $x^2$ probability=.0096 | | |

Zero-order gamma = .39

First-order partial gamma = .46

and parents who tend to perceive schools as open and accessible (Lucas & Lusthaus, 1977) report strong positive associations between parents' education and involvement with school personnel. Such interrlationships are also highly correlated with parents' expectations for their children's future schooling.

Associations between contact activity and other factors examined in this study are less salient in the literatures on home-school interaction. That parents maintained higher levels of contact for their least and most able children deserves some attention. Detailed data in this sample suggest that parents of poorer readers want more individualized but teacher-designed instruction, while parents of exceptionally able readers want individualized instruction which allows for considerable decision making by the child (see Wimpelberg, 1981). Parents of "average" children most often preferred larger group instruction. These results have implications for those who would press for expanded individualization of instruction; if parental acceptance, support, and reinforcement is important to such instructional policy it may materialize less often when the child shows neither exceptional difficulty nor advanced capabilities in reading skills.

That parents were more active in contacting their boys' teachers than their girls' teachers has significant implications for sex equity in schooling. Differences in investments, through teacher contacts, at the fifth-grade level can lead to cumulative effects over time which may limit the future schooling and occupational opportunities of girls more often than boys.

That parents were more involved in their children's schooling during the earlier years of residence than later allows for at least two

interpretations. Parents may invest in contacts more frequently during the first few years of residence simply to get to know the school and its personnel. Once assured that their children's schooling experiences are adequate (if not excellent) parents may detach themselves, over time, from close monitoring activity. An alternative explanation is less hopeful. If parents reduce contact activity because they learn that their interest and influence has no effect on the schooling their children receive they may become alienated and disaffected. Under such circumstances the positive benefits of home-school collaboration would be lost and the crisis of legitimacy of the schools exacerbated. Certain data from this sample suggest that the former explanation may be more accurate than the latter. Higher levels of contact activity in this sample were strongly associated with dissatisfaction with schooling ($x^2$ probability=.0519). Although this relationship is not statistically significant, it reveals that parents who expressed total satisfaction with their children's schooling maintained generally lower levels of contact with teachers than parents who expressed mild to severe dissatisfaction.

The implications of these findings for teachers and building principals relate to both sides of the general tension between professional and lay control over schooling. The results suggest that school personnel must continue to make schools accessible to those who tend to be less involved, namely, parents with lower levels of schooling. Schools might institute arrangements for bringing such parents into their children's classrooms and for coordinating classroom learning with at-home activities in which parents can be involved. If the ultimate purpose of parental participation is improved learning we should take note of the research of Edmonds (1979) and others who report that higher levels of parental involvement may, in

part, differentiate between more effective and less effective inner-city schools.

If we emphasize the professional responsibilities in the control question, school personnel may be advised to reassert their role in loco parentis, particularly in behalf of children whose parents hold lower expectations for their educational futures and for girls. As regards the latter factor, teachers might be alerted to the possibility that the active involvement of parents may tend to advantage boys and disadvantage girls. Educational researchers might also investigate more fully the question of sex equity, in addition to sex-role stereotyping, in the earlier years of schooling.

These are, of course, tall orders for personnel who may already feel beleagered by the demands and requirements placed on their work. Yet if we respond to Hawley's call to adapt learning environments to individual children rather than rely on the grand panaceas of comprehensive innovations (Hawley, 1978), we cannot but elevate the importance of home-school interactions. This study exposes some of the characteristics of parents and children which might inform such a redirection in the educational mission.

Finally, if political activity can be defined in its broadest sense, the participatory activity of parents at the levels of school and classroom becomes germane to the study of educational politics and may have as much or more to do with educational outcomes than district level policy making.

## Notes

1. Expectations for the child's future schooling may also be classified as a "child factor" if parental expectations are based on their perceptions of the child's abilities.

2. The supporting grant for this project was from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE-P-79-0081). J. Alan Thomas and Susan S. Stodolsky were Co-Principal Investigators.

3. Crosstabular analysis indicated that a curvilinear relationship holds between contact activity and reading ability in this sample. Parents more generally more active in contacting teachers when their children were "very good" readers or "poor" readers. Parents of "grade-level" readers had considerably lower levels of contact with teachers.

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## Appendix: Specification of Selected Variables

### Parent Contacts with Teachers

To measure the frequency and content of parents' contacts with school personnel, interviewers charted the timing of any contacts, in person, by phone, or by written correspondence, between either parent and the child's teachers. For each contact, parents were asked to describe the person who initiated the contact, the purposes and topic of discussion, and the outcome.

Only information on contacts which occurred from the beginning of the 1979-80 school year through the month of January 1980 were used in the scoring of this variable. Tow categories, "lower" and "higher" activity, were created on the basis of two criteria: the number of contacts and the degree of parent initiation either in arranging contacts or in seeking or transmitting information relevant to the child's academic program and performance. Initiation of the latter sort is meant to account for those parents who brought their own "agendas" to conversations with teachers, regardless of who had originally planned for the contacts. Parents who were high initiators of this type reported that they engaged in contacts with specific quiries, not just to participate in an "open house" audience; such parents tended to ask for details about their children's acadmic performance, to ask how they might help the child with schoolwork at home, and to request specific information about the content, objectives, and expectations associated with one or another curricular subject.

Households were place in the "lower" activity category if they reported three or fewer contacts with no self-initiation in either arranging the contacts or in structuring the exchange of information during the contacts. Parents in the "higher" activity category reported three or more contacts with evidence of one or both forms of self-initiation.

### Parents' Education

In this study we used the mother's and father's highest levels of schooling (or the schooling of surrogate parents) as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status. Interviewers asked respondents to list the highest level of schooling completed by each parent. For analysis of the relationship of this measure to other variables, households were grouped into three categories, "low," "middle," and "high" levels of parent education. Parents in low education households had twelve years of schooling or less. In middle education households, one or both parents had some post-secondary schooling, but neither had a four-year college degree. In high education households, one or both parents had at least a four-year college degree.

### Ability of the Child

Because reading ability is essential to the development of learning in virtually all areas of content in the school program, we selected the children's scores on the reading comprehension subsection of the Science Research Associates battery of achievement tests as a proxy for general ability. The fifth-grade children in our sample were grouped for analysis according to the grade equivalency of their raw scores on the test. Children

categorized as "poor" readers had scores with grade equivalencies less than fourth grade (less than 4.0). Those whom we labelled as "grade-level" readers had grade-equivalent scores ranging from the fourth grade through the first level of the seventh grade (4.0 through 7.0). "Very good" readers had scores above the base level for seventh grade (7.1 or higher).

## Parental Preferences for Curricular Variety

Fifth-grade classrooms differ very little in their basic curricular programs for children. Most offer studies in elements of language, arithmetic, social studies, science, and physical education. While the specific content, instructional approach, and teaching effectiveness may vary from one classroom to another, the majority of fifth-grade children are engaged for some regular part of each day in these studies. Since schools may differ more in their inclusion of vocal music, instrumental music, art, and foreign languages, we chose to assess variations among parents in their preferences regarding these less traditional subjects in the child's program.

Parents were asked to select a point of view which would best reflect their judgment concerning the appropriateness of each subject in their fifth-grade child's curriculum. The selection available to parents was equivalent to "strongly favoring," "mildly favoring," "mildly opposing," "strongly opposing," or "standing neutral on" the inclusion of each of the subjects, vocal and instrumental music, art, and foreign languages. For the analysis, households were grouped into two categories labelled "less variety" preferred and "more variety" preferred. The categorization was based on two criteria. Households classified as preferring more curricular variety did not oppose the inclusion of any of teh four subjects and strongly favored at least two of the four. Hoseholds preferring less curricular variety opposed the inclusion of one or more subjects and were strongly in favor of no more than one subject.

## Parental Preferences for Instructional Grouping

With a second preference measure we attempted to gauge parents' perceptions of the most advantageous instructional arrangements for their fifth-grade child. We hypothesized that parents may differ in the extent to which they identify some form of individualized treatment of the child as a desired mode of instruction. Interviewers presented parents with descriptions of four modes of instructional organization: two were focussed directly on the individual child (one allowing for teacher-prescribed individualization, the second allowing for student participation in setting the goals and means of learning); the third allowed for the division of the whole class in to subsets of children for instructional purposes; and the fourth treated the entire classroom of children as a unit for instruction. Parents were aksed to select any single mode or combination of modes which they thought would best serve their child. A dichotomous classification of parents' responses divides the sample according to preferences for "smaller group" and "larger group" instruction. The former category includes the households which preferred only individualized modes or combinations of modes exclusive of whole group instruction. The category labelled "larger group" includes all other households which listed whole group instruction as the single preference or in combination with other arrangements.

## Parents' Expectations for the Child's Future Schooling

During the home interview parents were asked to specify, from a list of choices, the level of schooling they expected their fifth-grade child to complete. The list included high school, two years of college or trade school, four years of college, and graduate level studies. For anlaysis, we dichotomized the sample between those households in which the child was expected to complete two years of college or less and those in which the child was expected to attend at least four years of college.

## Satisfaction with Child's Schooling Experiences

Parents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the schooling experiences their child had in his or her current school. Parents responded by chosing a position on a five-point scale running from strongly dissatisfied to strongly satisfied. For analyses, the households were grouped to separate those in which parents were strongly satisfied from those in which parents reported mild to severe dissatisfaction.